

Professors Are People Too, Episode 1: Professor Gina Barreca

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ALI OSHINSKIE: HOST: I'm Ali Oshinskie and this semester I'm taking you on a tour, a tour of the friends you didn't know you could have, the advice you didn't know you could ask for, and the professors you didn't know were, like, people.

PROFESSOR DWIGHT CODR: Professor

PROFESSOR SEAN FORBES: Professor

PROFESSOR GINA BARRECA: Professor

OSHINSKIE: Professors are People Too

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OSHINSKIE: In the first episode of Professors Are People Too, we're going to the basement of the Austin building to meet the most tenured faculty of the English Department

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GINA BARRECA: (different clips) Professor. Professah. Gina Barreca. Gina Barreca.

OSHINSKIE: You guessed it. Professor

BARRECA: and I'm a Professah.

OSHINSKIE: Professah Gina Barreca.

OSHINSKIE: Remember in elementary school when you'd see your teacher at the grocery store and you like freaked out? It was hard to believe that the Mrs Wallace that taught you about long division earlier that day was buying potato chips, in the grocery store, right now.

[MUSIC OUT]

By college we know better but somehow our professors remain in that unbelievable realm. The Mr. and Mrs. are now Professor and Doctor and instead of long division and potato chips its scholarly essays and honorary degrees. These people have incredible awards and accomplishments. They probably went to Yale or Oxford. And I'm over here filling my C.V. with the most "Likes" I've gotten on Instagram and aspiring to live in a reconstructed mini-van someday. With so much difference between us, why would they care about me? And why should I care about them? And that's what I was thinking when I first heard of Professor Barreca, because I heard it through my mom.

DOREEN OSHINSKIE: Ali, you have to take a class with Gina Barreca at UCONN!

OSHINSKIE: That's my mom.

DOREEN OSHINSKIE: She's so funny, and you would love her.

OSHINSKIE: And being the avid emailer that she is...

DOREEN OSHINSKIE: And I'm sending you this article you've gotta read it.

OSHINSKIE: Around course selection time she came up again. A friend suggested that I take her Creative Writing course. It was one of those *have to* kind of things.

SIERRA MAZUR: Gina's writing course is something that everyone should take regardless of your major, where you want to end up in life, what career you're looking towards. It will help you in, like, many, many, many ways.

OSHINSKIE: So a year later I enroll in her Creative Writing course. I kept hearing all these awesome things about Professor Barreca so how could I not? I saw her stack of books at the Co-op, someone showed me a picture of her with Taylor Swift, and a couple of friends talk about going to her office hours and just hanging out with her. This is gonna to be so cool! And then in the first class of the semester she gives us the syllabus, except she calls it a contract. She stresses the importance of deadlines and said that if we're late, we will not be welcomed. We had seven papers to write for this class with two

deadlines per week. And if we got the assignments in late, she wouldn't even look at them: no exceptions.

BARRECA: I give very strict deadlines for getting work done. I don't accept work late. There are no electronic devices allowed in my classroom. If I see you with your hands in your lap, I'm going to assume you're masturbating. It's essential that everybody is awake and alert and paying attention. Students have to learn how to take notes. I do not write on the board, I grew up in New York, I do not turn my back on a crowd.

OSHINSKIE: Wow. This is gonna be a lot of work. But it didn't feel like Professor Barreca made it this way because she was out to get us.

BARRECA: Within the boundaries that are set, there's an enormous amount of freedom: is what I think is important, and, so I'm about making sure that the classes are very structured, that I think the students know what my expectations are and again I think that most people rise to them. But that within that structure everybody can feel comfortable.

OSHINSKIE: After the first couple of weeks of class, we start to realize how big a deal Professor Barreca is. As it turns out her heyday was not at Yale or Oxford but

BARRECA: Cambridge University, where I was a Reynolds Fellow.

OSHINSKIE: She's got a couple of accomplishments:

BARRECA: I was honored by the Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame, regular on Faith Middleton's NPR Show,

OSHINSKIE: Hi Faith Middleton, I hope you're listening.

BARRECA: the 100 Best Books, honorary degrees, Elle's Readers Pick

OSHINSKIE: She's written and edited a few books:

BARRECA: Uh, there's *Untamed and Unabashed; They Used to Call Me Snow White But I Drifted; The Penguin Book of Women's Humor; Last Laughs; I'm With Stupid; Sex and Death and Victorian Literature*. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine "If You Lean In Will Men Just Look Down Your Blouse?" was ten and then for edited: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen.

OSHINSKIE: She's got a column that gets syndicated in just one or two places:

BARRECA: *The Hartford Courant*, *Seattle Times*, Georgia, the Arab Emirates, I'm big in New Zealand.

OSHINSKIE: And she's been on Oprah.

BARRECA: I've been on Oprah four times. You would never get paid to go on any of these TV shows. I was on 20-20 and 48 Hours and Oprah and the Today Show. Then the idea is that it will get you publicity. But being on Oprah was really fun because returning to school the next day after taping out in Chicago at the Harpo Studios, it was the only time that students would come up and like, high five me in the hallway. The students I've never met. And I thought: That's what you're doing in the afternoon, you're supposed to be in the library, how do you know I was on TV if you were watching T.V. What are you doing watching? It was fun and my relatives, being my relatives, would say, "No, you looked good. You looked a little heavy."

OSHINSKIE: Each time we learn something new and impressive about Professor Barreca, it was intimidating. She was such an accomplished woman. And she wanted to read my writing? In those first weeks I could feel the same resistance from my classmates: some people wanted to be mysterious, others were just shy but I'm pretty sure that we all wanted to impress her. But story sharing would not be a competition in Professor Barreca's classroom. And soon I realized that every accomplishment she shared was just the backdrop for a story, a story that worked perfectly.

BARRECA: One of the times I was on Oprah was with these two women who were called the Rules Girls. They had written a book called *The Rules*. And it should have been titled *How to Start your Bad First Marriage*. It was an advice book for young women about how to trap some poor unsuspecting guy and to marry them, basically by withholding sex. And I thought this wasn't really such great advice. Um, not the withholding sex part you can do, or not do, anything you want to as you choose, but using that as a form of power seems manipulative and also a setback to some sort of 17th century, patriarchal guidebook that did not seem to have women's autonomy and independence as its goal. So, um, I had been on Oprah a couple of times before that and so I knew what to expect being on the show, and they knew what to expect from me as a guest. And so they knew that I was not exactly going to be this shy, retiring guest. And there were these two women who were exactly my age and uh, there was a blonde and a brunette. And not to sound nasty, but the blonde was as blonde as I am, which is not blonde (laughter). The

blond talks like she's very New York, very New York - Long Island accent. And so that's not far, you know, that's sort of in my youth. And so I can do that. The brunette, her co-author did not speak for whatever reason: it's like Penn and Teller. So I come on and I'm wearing a scarf and pearls and so I look like every female expert is supposed to look. So I'm there to be the expert, I'm there to discuss why I think that this book is not a good idea. And I get a question that is very personal, I'm not expecting to be asked that because I'm there as the expert. And so I come on as the expert and the blonde goes "Docta Barrekka" and makes doctor sound like road-kill first of all so "DOCTA BARREKKA! We hear you have a real problem with ahh book?" (Laugh) And I say, "Well, yes, actually I do. I think that your book really uh, is not only disrespectful to women, but is actually shows an enormous contempt for men. It's like If I was a guy I'd be protesting outside your publisher's office. I mean this shows men as morons, I don't think this is respectful to men at all." And she says, "Well, we're both on our Furst Marriage. How many times have you been married?" And you know the audience sorta goes 'woo' and I think "you know what? I'm too close to menopause to, you know, just not have a good time with this." And so I answer honestly and so I answer "I've been married twice." And she says "Well, like I said, we've both on our first marriage." And I said "Yeah honey but I'm on my last." And there's a pause in the response and then the audience really starts to laugh and some old lady back in the audience yells out, "YOU GO GIRL" and I thought I'm just going to have fun, and you know, there's a reason I'm an English teacher and make my students learn the lines from the books they are studying. And I said "look, my problem with your book is that on page 18 you say, and I quote "that a Rules Girl should never laugh in front of the guy she finds attractive that she has to be like the Mona Lisa, she has to just smile, she can't just laugh out loud. She should save the laughter for her girlfriends." I said, you know "this is the most ridiculous thing I've heard, you can't laugh out loud?" And then on page 118, it says no matter "no matter how hot the sex gets you have to remain cool." And I said, "You can't laugh out loud, you can't have hot sex, why do you want a partner?" I say this "you know, you could live alone, you would always know where the remote was. You know you can hire people to open jars, I mean you don't have to find a partner just to do that." And they didn't think that was funny. Add um, then at one point the blond said to me, and this was her real mistake, and she said "OHH, I think the lady doth protest too much." And I said, "It's the lady doth protest too much methinks." I'm correcting this woman's misuse of Shakespeare on the Oprah Winfrey show and I mean at that point the audience was laughing and laughing. You know, we're going back to Elizabeth Janeway's definition of power where she says 'power is the ability not to have to please.' And one of the nice things about being on those shows is knowing I don't have to please.

OSHINSKIE: She had this graceful sense of humor that could be emotionally honest at the same time. And although it wasn't on the syllabus, we were going to have to do the same. The writing prompts demanded a type of emotional exposure that I'd never had to give in an academic setting before. In the third week we were assigned this essay, "Write the letter of apology you have been hoping to get. Write it from their point of view. And make it convincing." So I sat down to this prompt with an idea, but certainly not one that I wanted to share with all my classmates. Did I want these people to see me in this way? I typed it up and sent it in anyway.

[MUSIC IN]

But something sort of amazing happened. As I read through my classmates essays, I realized that we all simultaneously took the plunge. There were apologies from parents who had been absent, admissions of guilt or jealousy from exes, an honest moments from each of our personal histories that we never thought we'd tell thirteen strangers about. We made an unspoken agreement that week: we weren't going to be strangers anymore. And there was an agreement between Professor Barreca and all of us, we would unravel our stories and she would help us make them better.

BARRECA: Well, stories and feelings go together. I mean you need to figure out why you feel a certain way, you think something, you worry about something: there is a story behind it. So, I will often say when a student walks in, "What's your story?" When I would ever have a conversation with my dad he would always start with "What's your story? Give me your story." And so I always had a story. What's your story? Stories were always important in my family and they're important to me because it's more than just an exchange of information. You choose to put words in a certain order. Often the story that's on the top, the information you think you're giving, that's gonna be the story isn't going to be the real story. And so that you need to talk around it, you need to figure out what the story is and then as you are sort of circling around it, you'll realize that putting words in a certain order and the way you tell the story sometimes leads you to understand that it's the story underneath the ostensible story that's really going to matter.

[MUSIC OUT]

OSHINSKIE: So I have an admission to make: I think I've been circling around the story of this podcast. Hearing those words from Professor Barreca again I'm asking myself "What's the story underneath?" I went to her looking for guidance on this episode. She said to me "Ali, you've been working on it for too long. You just have to get it done, You just have to go in there and finish it. And it doesn't have to be perfect." And you know what? She's right. She called me out and that's what I needed. And I'm starting to realize

that's what good professors do. It's not the assignments or the grades they give you that make you a better student. It's how they allow you to see yourself, they reflect to you the most important lessons. But you know what? I think I'm going to let Professor Barreca take this one.

BARRECA: The first woman professor I ever had at Dartmouth was a woman named Faith, Faith Dunn. She had dark curly hair. She was like the only other person who had dark curly hair. She had a family, uh, she had a husband and kids. And it was like, you could be a professor and actually have a life, I mean that was amazing. She didn't feel that somehow she had to compartmentalize the parts of her life. So that, it wasn't like she had to only had to seem to be a scholar and not a person. You could see that she had a lot going on, but she always had time for any student who wanted to come in. She was maternal, but not in a soft and easy way. She was maternal in a wonderful sense, in that you felt that her respect for you was unconditional, but her admiration for you was going to depend on how well you did. (laughter) And I never put it that way before but I think that that was really it. And so, she was somebody who I really looked at and thought "now wait a minute, maybe I could be somebody like that." And it was the first time that I ever saw a woman who seemed to have both a professional life and a personal life that she integrated and that she seemed to enjoy, she seemed happy. And she was also somebody who I remember calling me on my stuff when you know when I handed in something that wasn't clearly wasn't as good as it should have been, she, like, turned it back and said "you didn't do what you should have done with this so do it again." Ok, it's not just because she likes me what she will like everything I do. And my teachers

[MUSIC IN]

both as a graduate and when I was an undergraduate were enormously kind to me and I always promised myself that I would try to be as welcoming as they were to my students if I were ever fortunate enough to ever to be in a position that they were in at a university. And so I've tried to model myself after them. I'm just part of the legacy, I think, of teachers that I've seen the way that people thrive when they feel that somebody's got their back. And that doesn't mean being uncritical. I mean, I present a very honest, critical response to the students who then rise to the occasion.

OSHINSKIE: So I guess this story is about the tenderness in being called out, the love behind the critical comment. Professor Barreca was calling me on on my stuff not as an act of disrespect, but as a push for my own self improvement. And isn't that the ultimate assignment? Being seen as something more than you think you are, and then being asked to write, to think, and to be, as good as you are. Seeing this legacy of women. Of professors who push their students beyond self doubt makes this whole college thing suddenly bigger than grades and GPA's. It's uncomfortable getting a C, and at first it's

uncomfortable getting to know the people who can give C's. So arming myself with a cup of coffee and a genuine interest to get to know this obviously wise woman, I saw that the grades were just a stand in for a challenge. A challenge that I needed to face. So professors are people, people who want you to succeed. People who know how good you can be, even if you don't.

So go grab a cup of coffee, bring it to your favorite professor, and start to get to know their story. Or someone who you think could be your favorite professor. Or the professor who just gave you a C: you probably despise them right now but they could become your new best friend.

Thanks for listening to my first episode, I really hope you enjoyed it. Professors Are People Too is recorded and produced by me, Ali Oshinskie, but there are plenty of other people involved. I'd like to give a special thanks to Jason McMullan, Danielle Chaloux, Ruth Fairbanks, and Sean Forbes, for their guidance on the creation of this first episode. I'd also like to give a special thanks to my Professah Gina Barreca, thank you for being my debut subject. Keep your eyes peeled for the next episode of Professors Are People Too at whus.org. This is

PROFESSOR DWIGHT CODR: Professor

PROFESSOR SEAN FORBES: Professor

PROFESSOR GINA BARRECA: Professor

OSHINSKIE: Professors are People Too

[MUSIC OUT]

Professors Are People Too, Episode 2: Professor Cathy Schlund-Vials

Full Transcript, Listen to the episode at whus.org



ALI OSHINSKIE, HOST: It's the first day of class and there are two photos projected on the screen. One photo, the professor tells us, is from April 29th, 1975. There's a helicopter on top of the roof of a building and the staircase leading up to it is packed with people. This is the image that has come to symbolize the fall of Saigon.

[MUSIC IN]

And then there's another image. Two toddlers, their mother, and a birthday cake. And then she tells us the story behind this photo.

CATHY SCHLUND-VIALS: I was born September 2, 1974 and I was actually born in Thailand, outside of Royal Thai Udorn Air Force base which is the northern part of the country, um, very close to the Laotian border and just so happens that that Air Force Base was the headquarters for the Air America Fleet and that was the CIA owned fleet. The images of helicopters that are rescuing Vietnamese refugees and people trying to get out of the fallen city of Saigon; those were helicopters, that were CIA owned helicopters, they flew out of this air force base. So I mention all this because my biological mother was a Cambodian woman who married a Thai pilot who was being trained by the CIA and by the Air Force to fly missions. She had an affair with an American G.I. who was stationed there. She had two children, two mixed race children - me and my twin brother - and my biological father was actually married he had four kids in Leominster, Massachusetts and he left. And here's my biological mother and she's married, has had an affair, and she's looking to give up two children. And it just so happened that my adoptive parents - so my mother's Japanese, my father's American they were stationed at that Air Force base. And for the first thirteen years of my parent's marriage they had been looking for children and part of the reason they were looking for children is my mother was eleven years-old when the bomb at Nagasaki was dropped and she lived roughly 20 miles outside of Nagasaki and she would never talk about this, I've

mentioned this, she would never talk about radiation or things like that but none of the women in her family have ever had children. So she had spent all this time with my father looking for children and they find two mixed-race children and they adopt us for \$25 dollars (laugh), you know it's a war. Um, and then we eventually leave and that's the photo, like the photo that I show, that's the first family photo, that's my first adoption photo. So actually, that's the story.

OSHINSKIE: That the story

[MUSIC IN]

And this is Professor

SCHLUND-VIALS: Cathy Schlund-Vials

OSHINSKIE: Do you have like a good joke?

SCHLUND-VIALS: Not one that's appropriate.

OSHINSKIE: (laughter) I want people to know you're funny in this podcast. We talk about a lot of serious stuff...and you're funny.

SCHLUND-VIALS: I know, but I'm awful at telling jokes.

OSHINSKIE: I'm Ali Oshinskie and this is Professors Are People Too, a show about the friends you didn't know you could have, the advice you didn't know you could ask for, and the professors you didn't know were like -- people.

[MUSIC OUT]

OSHINSKIE: After hearing that story, I realized that I didn't know anything nearly that personal about my other professors. This is a space that students and professors just don't go to. But for Professor Schlund-Vials, this space is an inroad to teaching. It's how she contextualizes it. It's a personal history, but it's also an academic history. On the first day she showed us two images related to the fall of Saigon. She found one of them on the internet and the other in a family album.

SCHLUND-VIALS: I knew that I was part of the Vietnam War, but I didn't understand the specificity of it. I mean I think history matters, considerably especially when you don't know that history that brought you into being, and so for example, I have thought for the longest time that I was Thai-American. Because I was born in Thailand and I

remember being 23, about to go to graduate school made a joke with my dad that the only film for Thai people was the *King and I*, just like this musical. And he said “No your film’s *The Killing Fields*. You’re actually Cambodian.” And I never really thought about that because it had never really been expressed. And it just really threw me for a loop because I had no idea about Cambodian-American experiences outside of a very limited knowledge of the Killing Fields, um, Era which was the period where 1.7 million Cambodians perished, right? In a three year, eight month, twenty-day period, under an authoritarian regime. But I didn’t know the specificity of that and I felt completely displaced because I had predicated my entire life, up to that point, being an entirely different type of South-East Asian American. And for me that’s like all the work that I do is personally driven. It’s historically based, um and then it’s usually focused on race but it does come out of that not knowing. And so I share that with students, but I think that we all have that like there are certain family histories that don’t make sense unless you apply, like kind of other historical frames to that. So I’m not exceptional. I think it’s pretty like kind of normal.

OSHINSKIE: I found this funny. If this wasn’t exceptional, then clearly I’ve been asleep when other professors personally contextualized the entire course on the first day of classes. But she’s right: it’s not exceptional to have family stories woven into significant historical events. But for Professor Schlund-Vials, her family album didn’t come with a comprehensive history. So she had to uncover it herself.

SCHLUND-VIALS: So I use that experience because that I think that it individualizes it and it’s about like, what’s forgotten because like what I’ve just told you which took a very chronological format.

OSHINSKIE: She means the story of her birth and her adoption.

SCHLUND-VIALS: That took me years to put together. You know because my parents never talked about it. I would have to ask questions and then do a little more research and then ask a different question. Or like learn to listen silences that my parents weren’t talking about. And so listening to silences are just like what is not said or what’s said differently.

OSHINSKIE: Listening into those silences Professor Schlund-Vials maybe the coolest war story I’ve ever heard.

SCHLUND-VIALS: My father doesn’t really talk about the Vietnam War in the way I would expect a veteran to talk about the war. But what he talks about are the things that

impacted him for example, the fact that his job was to load the munitions onto aircraft. And he just mentions “Oh well, sometimes if you’d just put a piece of paper into the lock mechanism and the pilot would go off: that would actually prevent a bombing. And it wouldn’t kill anybody, but it was just a little piece of paper.” And it was just like he wouldn’t say he did that because that would be something that was kind of like illegal and you know, but it’s kind of like a profound piece of knowledge that would only be known to somebody who had experience with that or knew of that practice, right?

OSHINSKIE: What an amazing story! At this point, I had what I’m going to call an “office hours crush.” Professor Schlund-Vials clearly has really cool stories and I wanted to hear them all. So I know I’m making this podcast about professors and going to their office hours, but normally I get kind of nervous. It’s not that I think a professor is gonna bite off my head, I just don’t know if we’ll have anything to talk about. I get mixed messages from professors and how they present their office hours. Are office hours for MLA formatting questions and begging for an extension on a paper? Or can I come in and we can just chat? One day, I happened to be walking past Professor Schlund-Vials’s office and her door was open--all the way. It was welcoming, and she taped a picture of two Corgi puppies spooning on it, so I considered that my invitation and I just walked in.

[MUSIC IN]

OSHINSKIE: When we got to talking, basically all of my office hours fears went away. First, we talked about dogs

SCHLUND-VIALS: We have two dogs and so...

OSHINSKIE: Corgis?

SCHLUND-VIALS: Just one Corgi and an Elkhound.

OSHINSKIE: What?

SCHLUND-VIALS: A Norwegian Elk hound.

OSHINSKIE: Is that like a hound kind of dog?

SCHLUND-VIALS: It looks like a German Shepard that was put in a dryer and then it was made into a medium-sized dog.

OSHINSKIE: And then we talked about Mexican food.

SCHLUND-VIALS: There's Bueno Y Sono...

OSHINSKIE: Yeah, that's it.

SCHLUND-VIALS: Yean, Bueno Y Sono! Yes...

OSHINSKIE: I went there, it's good.

SCHLUND-VIALS: It's good!

OSHINSKIE: It's very good.

OSHINSKIE: Our respective experiences in bartending.

SCHLUND-VIALS: How is it working in the one close to campus?

OSHINSKIE: Um, it was fine. Lots of Frappucinos.

SCHLUND-VIALS: I wasn't a flare bartender or anything like that and if somebody, you know, came to me and had a drink I didn't know I would just tell them what's in it? And if you couldn't tell me what's in it, you couldn't handle the responsibility of the drink so I wouldn't make it for you.

OSHINSKIE: Wow...

SCHLUND-VIALS: Yeah

OSHINSKIE: And the coolest part was, Cathy--as she told me to call her--didn't just stare at me and wait for me to make conversation.

SCHLUND-VIALS: Well how's that class going for you? ... Like what in particular ... I'm just curious... Well how do you feel...? What's your...What's your family history?...I'm just curious from your perspective?

OSHINSKIE: I didn't have to try to sound smart. Or come up with thoughtful and provoking questions. We just talked. And it turns out Cathy had some of the same anxieties I did when she was an undergrad.

SCHLUND-VIALS: When I was a student I never went to office hours -- because I was nervous. I wanted to seem smart. I didn't want someone to think I was like a dumbass. (laughter) And so what I would do was to just avoid professors. Like to the point where I would see them on campus and I would hide from them because I didn't want them to see me, you know? So I completely understand.

OSHINSKIE: Cathy is so funny. But when I asked her about it she like totally denied it.

SCHLUND-VIALS: I don't think I'm funny though. My brother's so funny, like I think like Chris is funny, you know? I think that...there are certain things that make me laugh -- My hatred or Arby's.

OSHINSKIE: The joke is she hates Arby's.

SCHLUND-VIALS: I don't know. I wouldn't say that I was a funny person.

OSHINSKIE: Ok so maybe Cathy's not doing stand-up or anything. But it's not really what she says, but how she says it that's funny. She uses this casual tone that can be self-deprecating.

SCHLUND-VIALS: It was the 90's and I was wearing Daisy Dukes and I thought that that was a good thing with a long shirt. Like, you know, it was not a good look.

OSHINSKIE: She also uses this tone in classroom conversations. Well, she's not self-deprecating, per se, but she doesn't approach class with an authoritative "I know and you don't" attitude. And that's what's amazing about this incredibly intelligent professor who studies racial politics. She can make the anxiety-ridden and heated topic of race feel like a conversation and not a lecture. I don't think I've ever had a professor who could do that. But before I head into that I should tell you a little bit more about me. But before I head into that, I should tell you a little bit more about me. I used to be a Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies major. I took classes about transnational feminism, intersectionality, types of masculinity, decolonization practices, types of feminism, ending the rape culture, intersectionality in race, sexuality, class, gender, perceived gender, nation of origin, disability and the list goes on. I took classes on those subjects, but didn't learn about those subjects. What I learned was how to stop asking

questions. Because if I said something that wasn't squeaky clean and totally feminist, and anti-racist, my classmates' hands would shoot into the air with seven different ways that I was wrong. I didn't just risk looking stupid when I asked a question; I risked looking like a bigot. Until Cathy's class, I don't think I learned about race in an environment where I wasn't scared to ask an honest question. I wanted to know how she did this. So in memory of all the questions I wished I didn't ask,

[MOVEMENT NOISE]

OSHINSKIE: Hi professor, can I come in?

SCHLUND-VIALS: Yeah.

OSHINSKIE: I went to Cathy's office hours to talk about race.

SCHLUND-VIALS: It's not so much educating someone to a position because I think that's hierarchical and a bit paternalistic--but you kind of assume that not everybody is not going to have the same vocabulary, they're going to struggle for example with discussions of race, which is what I tend to teach. So I never expect students or my colleagues to have this elevated vocabulary if they've never been exposed to it, right? And I was actually asked on a film that I was part of through a high school, like "well do you think like, a goal should be to end racism?" And I said "No, that's an absurd goal," right? Like that kind of takes away from the dialogic ability to talk about difference. I mean nobody can actually say "I'm not racist." I can't even say that, right? So if I'm honest with my students, as a person of color, and you know, talk about well there are struggles that I have on this conversation, I'm not the authority, I'm not always on the right side of history, that's actually is more meaningful, I think, than just saying "Oh, well we shouldn't be racist."

OSHINSKIE: I kept trying to pull the conversation back to current debates. Hoping that Cathy, wise and politically knowledgeable as she is, would have some perspective that I could model. And then she said this:

SCHLUND-VIALS: To, um, you know put forth a position without seeming open is never going to convince anybody, right? So like, I never, and this is something that I am very careful about, I don't like to bring politics, overt politics, into a classroom space.

OSHINSKIE: I should mention that we were talking before November 8th.

SCHLUND-VIALS: I was talking to a student about this in terms of Trump. Right, so obviously, well I think it's probably obvious to students, but I'm like so far left, I'm like a Marxist. (laughter) I am, like I believe in the disillusion of the Nation state. Like I believe in all these things, but, I also don't want somebody to feel that the conversation is shut down because I'm putting forward my political views. Because there's a hierarchy that I have to, that is maintained in the classroom. So I ultimately have the ultimate authority, regardless of what I may say in terms of I want the student-centered classroom, I learn from students – these are all true – but at the end of the day I'm the one assessing, grading, and I have power in that situation. So if I actually invoke Trump, that's going to shut down conversation because somebody in my classroom may actually be a Republican. So what's more advantageous, to alienate that person and to fulfil every expectation of what it means to be a politically correct subject? Or to actually just let that person come to a conclusion based on the material I present, which is largely historical. So, so you'll notice even in the class we're taking, I'm much more a historically driven person because I think that history can be a guide – you know if students feel they can talk about the history with some degree of familiarity, then they are probably going to have a better informed sense of how to talk about race, you know? But I think that the problem oftentimes in certain classes, particularly those that have the diversity, gen-ed designation, is that the assumption is that you have to fix people when they come into your class, that somehow they're racist, they're, like, pathologized in that way, so it is, like, your job to kind of shot them down. And I think that that is really not--I mean you're going to alienate--and you're actually going to confirm various positions that everybody puts on you: like narrow-minded, bleeding heart liberal and all that other stuff.

OSHINSKIE: What Cathy said was something I needed to hear. I left her office empowered. And then, the thing happened that no one expected --Trump won.

[MUSIC IN]

OSHINSKIE: I was sitting in the studio putting together this podcast as the votes came in, and I knew that I had to go back to Cathy's office.

SCHLUND-VIALS: I'm still thinking through this because the day after the election I had a number of students come into my office and they were very upset. And I think the tendency for people--you had mentioned the generational gap--is to just tell people how they should they be feeling or how they should be thinking. Or trying to put it in a, you know, just a very theoretical framework...and that's not the way people are experiencing this election, right? Or that's not the way they experience the election.

OSHINSKIE: The whirlwind of opinions, articles, and protests are telling me how to feel right now. And to be honest, I'm doing the same to others. I'm feeling history close in on me. I imagine my someday grandkids or kids asking, "what did you do then?" That anxiety narrows my mind at this moment. I want accuse and assume and yell because it feels like the right kind of radical action. Talking with Cathy, I saw her calm words and patient listening as radical too, a really necessary type of radical.

SCHLUND-VIALS: I think that it's a mistake to make the assumption that everybody who voted for a certain candidate was a racist. Um, you know, it's a lot easier to make that claim rather than talking to people. But, you know, what really upsets me is just the, you know kinda, the shutting down of a conversation and not understanding that, you know, questions lead to more curiosity. I never get upset when someone asks me where I'm from. That's a question that to me is a question that comes out of a true curiosity, treating me like a human being, not relegating me to the sidelines. But, you know, that's not the best question to ask someone who's Asian-American because there's this long history of racialization, what-have you. But that's not the time, to like, drop some science or, you know, spin knowledge on somebody because, you know, if I do that then I become--you know for better or worse--representative of a group of people. Because I think that when you accuse other people of being bigoted, or you, you know, accuse them of being on the wrong side of history--that's not a very self-aware position. Because I don't think any us are one hundred percent like perfect people in that regard, I mean, you can't.

[MUSIC IN]

OSHINSKIE: I wish I could have a moment at the end of this podcast that could make it all better. I wish I could know how to be on the right side of history. But I can't--because there are more than two sides to history, and there are more than two sides to an education. When I went to Cathy, I might have hoped for it but I knew she wasn't going to give me the right answer. Professors aren't the keepers of truth who hand down some golden key on graduation day. Because truth can't be kept and it's definitely not locked up. We're not in college to find the ultimate truth, we're here to learn curiosity, the skill of curiosity, to pose questions and inquire, both in class and office hours. So don't be afraid of your questions, even the ones that have been shut down, in fact, pull them out, dust them off, and find a professor to open them up with.

[MUSIC OUT]

[MUSIC IN]

OSHINSKIE: Thank you to Sean Forbes, Ruth Fairbanks, Jason McMullan, and Danielle Chaloux for their help and support with this podcast. A huge, special extra thanks to Cathy Schlund-Vials--I couldn't have asked for a more graceful and necessary guiding light in these past few weeks. And thanks to you listener. I am still so flattered by all the kind words and enthusiasm for the first episode. You are making all my little podcasting dreams come true. So please subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts and keep your eyes peeled for the next episode of

PROFESSOR DWIGHT CODR: Professor

PROFESSOR SEAN FORBES: Professor

PROFESSOR GINA BARRECA: Professor

OSHINSKIE: Professors are People Too

[MUSIC OUT]

Professors Are People Too, Episode 3: Professor Sean Forbes

Full Transcript, Listen to the
episode at whus.org



ALI OSHINSKIE, HOST: In this episode of People are Professors Too...

[RECORD SCRATCH]

Wait what? You heard me. People are professors too because in this episode I'm taking you to the professor who I first knew as a person and then as a professor. Meet the man behind the podcast, the poetic, the professional and the personable, Sean Frederick Forbes.

[MUSIC IN]

SEAN FORBES: And there's a reason why in the literary world, I'm known as Sean Frederick Forbes. There's a hearing impaired rapper and poet by the name of Sean Forbes out of Detroit. We were both born in the same year. We spell our names the same way. So we're often confused by people who are looking for him and they'll send me an email, and I'm thinking, "no, you have the wrong Sean Forbes." So in order to differentiate between the two, I decided to publish under Sean Frederick Forbes.

OSHINSKIE: I'm Ali Oshinskie and this is Professors are People Too.

RECORDING of OSHINSKIE: We don't see the human in our professors and for good reason.

FORBES: So what happened there?

OSHINSKIE: Yeah, so you kind of heard the three disjointed things in there, right? And that's kind of what I'm still considering.

OSHINSKIE: This is Sean and I talking about the podcast.

FORBES: Actually, this might be a blessing in disguise.

OSHINSKIE: Yeah?

OSHINSKIE: Sean's my advisor for the podcast. He's an Assistant Professor-in-Residence and the Director of Creative Writing. When he agreed to work with me on the podcast, I'm not sure either of us knew what we were really getting into. So here's a little back story. In August, I approached Ruth Fairbanks of the Writing Internship Program and said, "I want to make a podcast for the English Department." And I wanted to get academic credit for it. We worked out the logistics of the credit, and the next thing I knew I was in Professor Fairbank's office with this young, handsome, caramel-skinned professor. It's Professor Forbes and he's going to be my advisor. We figured out everything, and as I was leaving, I said, "Thank you, Professor Forbes. I'm so excited to work with you." And he responds --

FORBES: Just call me Sean.

OSHINSKIE: Okay, Sean. I'm going to call him Sean. I was so excited. Professor -- no, Sean -- is going to guide me through this podcast. He's young and hip, and he also likes Invisibilia which is, like, my favorite podcast too. So in the first week of classes, I go to his office hours or no, it's our podcast meeting but it's in his office. And it's also like a class because I'm getting credit for it but we're not in a classroom. Regardless, I'm all about it because I don't know if you've figured it out by now, but I love office hours. And we get to have office hours every week! But I had the idea that our weekly meetings would be more like a mini classroom. He would bring a lesson plan, and I'd ask questions. Sure, he'd never done a podcast before, but he teaches creative writing, how could it be that different?

[MUSIC IN]

On a weekly basis, I would bring Sean questions.

OSHINSKIE: Are there any ideas that you have about the interview?

OSHINSKIE: And he'd pause for a minute. And then he'd say that statement that seemed to echo through the room.

FORBES: That is a good question.

OSHINSKIE: We'd talk a little more, and eventually the question would come back to me.

FORBES: What else do you want to know about him? What else do you think is intriguing about him?

OSHINSKIE: In most of our meetings, there were these moments. I'd pose a question, and we'd sit there for a minute with the "I don't know's." And to be honest, I kept wondering when it was all going to kick in, when Sean would have that moment of "this is what you do" and the clouds would give way to this golden magnificent podcast, ready to go. And while I was waiting for the sky to open up, we would chat. We talked about horoscopes.

OSHINSKIE: Okay. So I'm curious to know. What's your zodiac sign?

FORBES: Oh, I'm a Capricorn.

OSHINSKIE: What's your favorite color?

FORBES: Blue. I always wear some shade of blue.

OSHINSKIE: You do.

OSHINSKIE: And this is where the details started to fill in. As I was telling other professor stories, I got a little bit of Sean's. He'd illuminate some conversations with his own examples, his own teaching examples.

FORBES: I used to think that I could only write about gay, male writers or I could only write about ethnic writers, whatever ethnic means. And then I started to say well why should I limit myself in this way? Because if I'm limiting myself, then isn't that hindering my learning experience? Because as a teacher, you don't know everything. I really did think for a long time, "Oh, my professors know everything about literature."

No, they don't. And I'm not going to purport to know that about -- everything about literature.

OSHINSKIE: And then he told me this.

FORBES: And then there are moments where students will ask me these brilliant questions, and I have this thought pause where I'm like -- I could answer this, but what if I answer it incorrectly? Or what if I don't have the information? So I'll just say, "Look, I'll get back to you."

[MUSIC IN]

OSHINSKIE: I thought about those questions, those uncomfortable room silencing questions. I started to break it down. They're uncomfortable because I don't have the answer. And the girl next to me doesn't have the answer. Or anybody else in the class. And we're sitting there looking at the professor because we're waiting for them to give into that awkward silence and tell us. We're waiting for them to deliver the answer because we believe that they have it, tucked away nicely in their lesson plan and poising themselves to drop the mic. But what I'm usually thinking is this.

FORBES: I could answer this, but what if I answer it incorrectly?

[MUSIC OUT]

PAWEL KOSTYK, ON PHONE: Hello?

OSHINSKIE: Hi.

KOSTYK: Hey, what's up?

OSHINSKIE: That's me talking to my boyfriend, Pawel.

OSHINSKIE: What are you doing this weekend?

KOSTYK: I do have -- on Saturday, I'm playing at the --

OSHINSKIE: He and another friend have a jazz duo, and they play regularly at the West End Poetry Society at the Metro Café in Hartford.

OSHINSKIE: Who's reading at it?

KOSTYK: Uh, It's Edwina Trentham, I believe, and Sean Frederick Forbes.

OSHINSKIE: Wait, what? Sean Frederick Forbes?

KOSTYK: Yeah.

OSHINSKIE: You know who he is, right?

KOSTYK: No idea.

OSHINSKIE: He's -- Sean Forbes. He's my podcast advisor.

[MUSIC IN]

[CAFE AMBIENT NOISE]

Okay. So I had to go to this reading. Of course, I did. I mean, to see my boyfriend but mostly to see Sean. Sorry Pawel. I had to see Sean not as just the professor but as the poet. Sean read a poem about his grandmother, and he prefaced it with this.

FORBES: Whenever she's going to the Red Lobster in particular, she will pack a switch blade, a 50 dollar tube of Givenchy lipstick, and her rosary beads. So in one outing, she's ready for a fight, she's ready to meet a man, and she's ready to meet her maker.

OSHINSKIE: After gracefully joining in on the laughter, Sean gave a slight nod, acknowledged the crowd and he began.

FORBES: Errand, 1949

Aillen in Providencia

The main road is a dirt road.
From Lazy Hill to Town it's more
than an hour on foot, but she refuses
to ride side-saddle on her brother's
horse. She's wearing open-toed
high heels, her thick black hair's
twisted into a fat chignon, her silky
floral dress clings to her stomach.

The women notice the slight bulge,
anticipating the disfigurement
of motherhood for her, while their husbands
crave the perspiration gathering in
her cleavage. She walks into the bank,
her dusty suede heels sparking
hard against the tiled floor, sweet
and sirenic. She spends fifteen
minutes writing a telegram
to her husband in Curaçao.
She pictures him kissing his mistress
and shoves the form to the clerk. He reads
the line, "That barren woman will lose
her scent. STOP. Come back." She sees the clerk
write this down on a separate piece of paper
knowing he will give it to his wife later.
She pays the fee, refuses to thank him, and slowly
leaves the bank, cautious as a freed slave.

OSHINSKIE: Sean's poetry flowed with familiarity. This woman, his grandmother was he, as he worded her thoughts and actions. And we were this woman for a minute, briefly transported to Providencia. How did he do this? I read poetry with this kind of clarity before, but I always assumed it was some sort of internal knowledge, that a poet could only write like this from his experience. So how could he, not a woman in dusty suede heels, not pregnant with an absent husband, not even alive in 1949 put down in words this moment so perfectly?

FORBES: I used to think that I could only write about gay male writers or I could only write about ethnic writers.

OSHINSKIE: I guess I made that mistake of assuming the writer is narrator and vice versa. I've talked to professors about literature before, but I've never seen a professor do literature before. And I don't think I've ever really met an author. In class, we talk about the motives of authors or the history behind it, and we get advice to make our own writing better. But I've never heard the history behind it, and known the author at the same time.

[MUSIC IN]

So I got to say, I have this weird belief that the best writers are touched with this sort of holy light, the angel of rolling ball pens and leather bound notebooks has come down and blessed them and left all us others untouched. But I still have to have some reason to hope for my own skill, right? And the best way to do that is in creative writing classes.

[MUSIC OUT]

So I went to Sean's. In the beginning of class, Sean takes a professional stance. He gives a few announcements,

[AMBIENT NOISE]

FORBES: Ok guys, I will take whatever you have for me...

OSHINSKIE: and then retreats to a desk at the back of the room. A group of students self-motivated to the front.

[MOVEMENT NOISE]

And then their comments begin. Sean sits in silence, save his trademark

FORBES: Mhm mhm

OSHINSKIE: and at the end, he chimes in.

FORBES: Everybody said a lot of what I wanted to say...I think that's the joy of workshops...providing some more background

OSHINSKIE: The class runs itself, and Sean seated among the students with a blue sweater and jeans is one of the workshop. And being part of the workshop, he puts himself in the position of the student. But this doesn't make total sense to me because of something Sean told me in one of our weekly meetings.

FORBES: My experience was that I was a graduate student here from 2003 to 2011. So for my Masters and my Ph.D...and then suddenly I was hired as an adjunct in 2011 to teach creative writing courses. A year after that, I became the Acting Director of the Creative Writing program. And now I'm Assistant Professor-in-Residence as well as the Director of the Creative Writing program. And so in some ways I felt like I had to

constantly prove myself and prove my abilities.

OSHINSKIE: And sometimes students want that proof too.

FORBES: I think sometimes it happens with students or it has happened with students where they'll say to me, "You're not really 35, are you?" Yes, I am. Do you want to see my driver's license? "You're too young to be teaching us. We're looking for someone who has the tweed jacket with the patches on the elbows." So they're thinking about a very distinctive type of college professor. And in some ways, I don't fit into that role for them or that vision of the college professor. So if I come into the classroom wearing jeans and sneakers, I notice that I'm treated differently by my students, automatically. The tone is very casual. They're very chatty. They're very talkative. And if I come into the classroom with slacks, a button down shirt and a sweater, the room goes silent.

OSHINSKIE: On that day in class, Sean wore jeans. A small choice that makes everything different from his point of view. But it's not just his fashion choices that changed things here. Putting himself in a seat next to his students, commenting after they do, having them run the class, these techniques all seem to boil down to that piece of writing advice that everyone knows: show, don't tell.

FORBES: It's a way of also putting myself in the student setting once again so that I don't ever lose the proportionality between student and professor, professor and student.

OSHINSKIE: And what is it that Sean wants to show?

OSHINSKIE: So you--Do you want to be a student there? Because that's kind of like --

FORBES: I do want to be a student there because, you know what? Sometimes I learn some of the greatest things about or greatest aspects or elements about writing from other students who are just observing, um, aspects of let's say a poem that I probably missed...because I was so concerned about something else.

[MUSIC IN]

OSHINSKIE: You want to keep learning?

FORBES: We always have to keep learning. If not, what's the point of being here? I think another reason if this can provide some context is because I think as a professor or even

as any type of teacher, you have to put yourself in the vulnerable position of being a student once again. And how incredibly terrifying it is for someone or many people to critique your work. And you're not sure how they're going to respond to it.

OSHINSKIE: Sean conducts class in his jeans. But even on days when he's wearing a sweater and button down, he's still a student because Sean is a lifelong learner. And being a lifelong learner means that everyone has a lesson to share. So at the end of the semester, I wanted to know what he learned from me.

OSHINSKIE: Why are you taking this class?

FORBES: Why am I taking this class? Well, why am I teaching this class?

OSHINSKIE: Why are you -- why did you decide to go along with this podcast project?

FORBES: Oh, that's a good question. I think that's a really good question. I wanted to know a lot more about podcasts because I listen to different podcasts. And I listen to WNPR a lot, and I think to myself, "Wow, there's so much work that goes into it, but what's the process? How do you even begin to develop a segment?" And I don't know what I was expecting for this project. I thought it was going to be different, spontaneous in some ways. I didn't expect for there to be all of this revising for some reason or all of this editing, and then I realized, "Oh, wait a minute. This is like writing. This is like telling -- this is telling a story." I knew you'd be telling a story in the different segments, but I didn't realize that the process is very similar to any act of writing.

[MUSIC IN]

I don't know. I think if you're a writer, and I think if you're someone who enjoys reading as much as I do, you have to understand that you can learn things about everyday situations that sometimes you can't find in a book or vice versa. And the same thing with class discussion. If I'm the only one who's speaking and no one else is speaking, it's highly problematic to me because it's one-sided.

OSHINSKIE: So maybe Sean's students don't see him as the typical professor. But maybe the tweed jacket gets in the way. Maybe the tweed jacket gives us this idea that the person with the book in the front of the classroom is already that divinely illuminated writer. Sean has a different kind of glow, that of a mirror, turning around the questions that we, the students, would come to him with. We know how to run towards the tweed jackets asking "how do I do this?" And thinking that the person with

the Ph.D. already has the answer. I'm sure Sean has that answer. But he's also sure that we have it.

There's so much love to give at the end of this episode. Thank you to Sean Forbes, the hip hop artist, not the professor, for letting me use your song, "I'm Deaf", at the beginning of this episode. And thanks also to Pawel Kostyk, my jazz guitar playing boyfriend for playing at Sean's reading and also for letting me use your cover of this song, "These Foolish Things (Remind Me of You)." Thanks also to Ruth Fairbanks, Jason McMullan, Danielle Chaloux, and Cathy Schlund-Vials for their help and support with this episode. And of course, thank you to Sean Forbes, the professor, the poet and the podcast advisor. This entire project has taken flight by your guidance. You knew I could even when I didn't. And now a little bit of good news for all of you devoted listeners or new ones, Season Two is on its way! Thank you for listening, and please subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. And keep your eyes peeled for the next episode of --

PROFESSOR DWIGHT CODR: Professor

PROFESSOR SEAN FORBES: Professor

PROFESSOR GINA BARRECA: Professor

OSHINSKIE: Professors are People Too

[MUSIC OUT]

OSHINSKIE (singing with music): dwee di di di dip, dwee diddle de, Professors are people too, dwee dee

Thank you Sean Frederick Forbes for letting us put his poem, *Errand, 1949*, in this transcript!

Works Cited

Forbes Forbes, Sean Frederick. *Providencia*. (New York: 2Leaf Press, 2013).